

# Treatment for Hepatitis C



## H C V E D U C A T I O N A L S E R I E S

### I have the hepatitis C virus (HCV). Can I be treated?

There are treatments for hepatitis C. However, these treatments are not right for everyone. Only you and your doctor can decide if a certain treatment is right for you.

### What do the treatments for hepatitis C try to do?

Treatments for hepatitis C try to do three things. Most of the time, they can't do them all.

- Remove ("clear") all the HCV from your body.
- Stop or slow down the damage to your liver.
- Make you feel better.

### What are the treatments that have been approved for hepatitis C?

Before your doctor can prescribe any treatment, it has to be approved for that purpose by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Right now, just two treatments for HCV have been approved by the FDA.

- Interferon by itself (called interferon *monotherapy*)
- Interferon combined with ribavirin (called *combination therapy*)

### What is interferon and how do I take it?

Interferon is a kind of protein. Your body uses interferon to help fight off infections. Everyone has interferon in their bodies all the time. If you take interferon as a treatment, your body will have much more interferon than it would naturally.

Interferon is only available as a shot. You can't take interferon in pill form. Most people who use interferon take three shots per week. Each shot contains 3 million units of the drug. Because of the way drugs are measured, 3 million units sound like a lot more medicine than it actually is. For a small number of people with HCV (about 15%), interferon is an effective treatment for HCV. Certain types of HCV (known as genotypes) are easier to treat than others. Your doctor can test you to see whether you are infected with one of these types.

### What is ribavirin and how do I take it?

Ribavirin is a medicine that fights certain viruses. It comes in a capsule (pill) that you can swallow. Ribavirin by itself doesn't work against HCV. But if you take ribavirin and interferon together, then both treatments work much better. In 30% to 40% of people who take ribavirin and interferon together, all the HCV is removed from their bodies.

### How will my doctor know if my treatment is working?

Your doctor may take blood samples from you before, during and after your treatment. By running tests on these samples, your doctor should be able to tell how well your treatment is working.

## My doctor told me I am a “complete responder.” What does that mean?

The treatment worked while you were taking the drugs and seemed to work even after the drugs were stopped.

## My doctor told me I am a “non-responder.” What does that mean?

HCV treatment doesn't work for everyone. In some people it works better than in others. If you are a non-responder, it means that your treatment didn't work as well as your doctor hoped that it would.

There are many different kinds of “non-response.” Some of the kinds that your doctor might mention are:

- **Transient response.** The treatment worked only as long as you took it. When you stopped taking it, HCV came back.
- **Breakthrough response.** The treatment seemed to work at first, but then it stopped working.
- **Partial response.** The treatment seemed to work a little bit, but it never worked completely.

## What are side effects, and what should I do if I have them?

“Side effects” are things that might happen in your body because of your treatment. Some side effects are serious, and make you feel sick. Others are mild, and make you feel a little different than normal. There are even side effects that you don't feel at all, but that your doctor may notice from lab tests or physical examinations. Having side effects doesn't always mean that you need to stop your treatment. Many unpleasant side effects might go away by themselves. Others can be *managed* by your doctor. For example, your doctor might give you another medicine that makes your side effects feel better.

If you notice side effects from your HCV treatment, tell your doctor right away. Do not stop taking your treatment, or change the amount, unless your doctor tells you to.

## What can I do to make my treatment work the best that it can?

The best way to help your treatment work is to follow your doctor's advice. Here are some other suggestions:

- Take care of yourself. Eat well, drink 8-10 glasses of water each day, and always get a full night's sleep.
- Take your medicine when you are supposed to. Take just as much medicine as your doctor tells you to.
- Tell your doctor about any side effects as soon as they happen.
- Keep all your appointments with your doctor. If you have to cancel an appointment, call your doctor and schedule a new one as soon as possible.
- Write down your doctor's name and phone number, and carry this information with you at all times.
- Write the names and amounts of the medicines you are taking, and carry this information with you at all times.
- Do not start taking any other medicines until you have checked with your doctor.
- Do not start taking any vitamins, supplements, herbal remedies or other over the counter drugs until you have checked with your doctor.

### For more information and support call

- Your local VA Health Care facility and the Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C web site (Internet address: <http://www.va.gov/hepatitisc>)
- The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) Hepatitis Toll-Free Information Line (1-888-4 HEP CDC) and web site (Internet address: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>)
- The American Liver Foundation 1-888-4 HEP USA or 1-800-GO LIVER. Internet address: <http://www.liverfoundation.org>



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